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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 0734
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000791

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, DRL/NESCA
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS PRESSURE PROMPTS NEW THREATS AND
CONTROLS FROM SARG

REF: DAMASCUS 00787

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[11](#). (C) Summary: Citing the pressure that international condemnation over the arrests of human rights lawyers Muhanad al-Hasani and Haitham al-Maleh had produced, Catherine al-Tali (strictly protect) told us state security services had employed a mixture of legal action and direct threats of imprisonment to limit the outflow of information from activists to diplomats and international NGOs. Muhanad al-Hasani's brother was summoned to security services offices and questioned. Tali has received threats that she could be arrested if she does not cease her human rights activities. Security services have also moved to remove a Cairo-based human rights lawyer from Muhanad al-Hasani's defense team. End Summary.

Hasani's Brother Threatened

[12](#). (C) Catherine al-Tali, a lawyer, Syrian Human Rights Organization-SWASIAH activist, and Muhanad al-Hasani's lieutenant, told us November 15 that state security Major General Zuheir Hamad ordered Muhanad's brother Mulham al-Hasani (strictly protect) to report to security offices for questioning on November 12. Mulham met with MajGen Hamad at 1300 and endured a 10-hour interrogation.

[13](#). (C) During the questioning, Tali said, Hamad demanded Mulham go to Adra prison, get power of attorney from Muhanad, and remove Cairo-based human rights lawyer Nasser Amin (reftel) from the list of lawyers authorized to defend Muhanad. "We hate all these Egyptians," Hamad reportedly shouted. Tali said she and Mulham visited Muhanad on November 14, explained Hamad's demands, and received Muhanad's blessings and power of attorney. Tali added that Muhanad confided to her he greatly feared for his brother's safety and asked her to "take care of him (Mulham)." MajGen Hamad warned Mulham that if word of his questioning leaked to the "outside," he would be immediately arrested, Tali told us.

The Fight For International Attention

¶4. (C) Mulham al-Hasani has begun the process of removing Nasser Amin's name for Muhanad's case, and will no longer be as active on his brother's behalf as he has been. Tali speculated that state security must be feeling "pressure" over the arrests of Hasani and Haitham Maleh to take the extraordinary step of interfering with Muhanad's defense team. For their parts, Mulham and Tali have been extremely energetic in raising Muhanad's profile. The pair has regularly updated diplomats throughout the disbarment proceedings (reftel) and in October traveled to Brussels and Strasbourg for an extensive set of meetings with representatives from the Council of the European Union's General Secretariat, the European Commission's Human Rights division, and EU Parliament advisors. Responding to a question from poloff, Tali doubted whether the call from MajGen Hamad stemmed from this recent European travel and claimed the security services had no clue they had met with EU officials.

¶5. (C) Tali and Mulham's EU meetings focused on human rights in general and Muhanad al-Hasani's case in particular. EU officials expressed displeasure over the current state of human rights in the region and assured Tali that the EU Association Agreement included specific human rights language (Article II). Tali said everyone she met regarded getting the Agreement signed as an important first step for the EU to gain influence over the human rights situation in Syria. Tali added she had informed EU officials that her organization and other civil society activists did not oppose the Agreement as long as human rights remained an essential element of the EU's dialogue with Syria.

Hasani's Open Letter

¶6. (SBU) Even though Hasani is not permitted to speak to other prisoners, has no access to a phone, can only leave his cell for one hour a day, and has limited family visits, he managed to smuggle a letter about his views on the rights of lawyers and his recent disbarment to Human Rights Watch, who published on-line on November 13. In the letter, Muhanad emphasized the lawyer's professional role vis-a-vis the nation's legal system and how it is a requirement for lawyers to take part in public causes related to legal questions. Hasani noted, "I have never criticized for the sake of criticism only, but have worked for values that I have acquired during my career as a lawyer, as an intellectual, as a citizen, and a human," he writes. Addressing the issue of his disbarment, he adds, "Finally, I regard my disbarment as a medal on my chest of which I am proud and which I give to all the deprived and oppressed, especially to those prisoners of conscience who I had the honor to represent and defend."

Tali Threatened

¶7. (C) Tali, who for the last few years has not been on the security services' radar, stated she had also received a threat from state security. On November 11, security agents contacted her family in Sednaya and told them that if Tali did not stop her activism, she would soon be arrested. "If you did not raise her properly, then we will," the security agent reportedly warned her family.

¶8. (C) Comment: While lengthy interrogations of activists' family members are not unusual, demanding the cancellation of Nasser Amin's right to represent Muhanad al-Hasani suggests a new and potentially exploitable sensitivity to international pressure. The SARG clearly wants human rights dissonance removed from its communications with regional and western governments, and it has gone to great lengths to bury human rights sources like Hasani and Haitham Maleh out of sight. Ironically, following 10 months of relative quiet in which the regime continued detaining and convicting activists with

impunity, the SARG appears to have lost control of the human rights question as evinced by the steady human rights chatter surrounding the EU Association Agreement, recent public statements on Maleh's arrest by the U.K., France, the U.S. and Canada, Turkey's engagement with Syria on its new Kurdish policy, attention from regional lawyers' associations, Human Rights Watch publication of Hasani's letter, and Syria's own advocacy of the Goldstone report on the grounds of human rights. President Obama's continued emphasis on human and civil rights, most recently at the November ASEAN summit and his subsequent visit to China, might provide upcoming official visitors to Damascus an occasion for illustrating to SARG interlocutors how engagement and criticism can be coupled together productively. Such conversations with SARG officials will prove crucial to convincing the Syrians that neither the U.S. nor the West will relent in their insistence for a human rights dialogue as part of any engagement with Damascus.

HUNTER